



'Stabilization' and UN Peace Operations

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The term 'stabilization' has been frequently used by the UN. But what exactly does the term mean in the UN context and does its use denote a shift in the practice of the UN?

Author's note: For a more complete discussion of stabilization and UN peace operations please see Alexander Gilder, 'The Effect of 'Stabilization' in the Mandates and Practice of UN Peace Operations' (2019) *Netherlands International Law Review* 66(1) 47-73. The article is available [Open Access here](#).

The term 'stabilization' has, over the last decade, become a buzzword within the UN Security Council. To illustrate, the term was mentioned in 10% of Council meetings in 2001 but by 2014 stabilization was mentioned in 44%. Part of the trend is due to the fact four UN peace operations have included stabilization in their title since 2004:

- the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti, MINUSTAH (2004 – 2017);
- the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, MONUSCO (1999 – present, established as MONUC and renamed MONUSCO to include stabilization in 2010);
- the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, MINUSMA (2013 – present);
- and United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic, MINUSCA (2014 – present).

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The inclusion of stabilization in the title of missions and increased mention of the term in the Security Council begs the question of what exactly the term means in the UN context and whether it denotes a shift in the practice of the UN? [Recent research](#) by Cedric de Coning reported that some UN officials say no specific significance should be given to the fact that some missions have been designated 'stabilization' missions. This, though, is unsatisfactory as the terminology of stabilization has undoubtedly encroached on the day to day activities of the Security Council and consequently the [Department of Peace Operations](#).

In 2015 the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations [Report](#) stated, “[t]he term “stabilization” has a wide range of interpretations, and the Panel believes the usage of that term by the United Nations requires clarification.” The UN has not formally adopted a definition of the term or clear policy guidelines on what activities a stabilization mission will entail. In practice, the operations that use the term stabilization have a range of different activities in their mandates.

Within the Security Council, France, the UK and the US have developed a system in which they act as ‘[penholders](#)’ and assume a leadership role on a thematic or country-specific issue. This system has resulted in those three permanent members taking the leadership roles on a number of peace operations. Two of those countries, the UK and US, have developed extensive stabilization policies at the national level that can shed light on the UN’s understanding of the term. The UK Stabilisation Unit [defines](#) stabilisation as:

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“ ...an activity undertaken as an initial response to violence or the immediate threat of violence ... when undertaking stabilisation interventions, the UK seeks to protect the means of survival and restore basic security, promote and support a political process to reduce violence as well as prepare a foundation for longer term stability. ”

The UK focuses on a civilian-led approach to stabilization which is supported by the military.

Conversely, the US takes a **narrower approach** where the goal of stabilization is to support the legitimate authority in securing the monopoly on the use of force to enable the authority to protect its population. The US aims to use the military to defeat an insurgency while entrenching support for a domestically owned transition towards peace. There are similarities between the UK and US approaches with both identifying a legitimate authority to which support is provided and the capacity building of the authority to be able to deflect spoilers to peace.

The practice of UN stabilization missions

UN missions that include 'stabilization' in their title have a notable congruence in their mandates which denote a somewhat similar starting point in the UN's approach to stabilization. First, they are mandated to support the extension of state authority. Second, they operate alongside state forces and actively build the capacity of those forces. Third, they use varying degrees of proactive, 'robust' force to prevent attacks on themselves and those they are mandated to protect. Lastly, they have mandates to support (re)establishing the rule of law.

For instance, MINUSMA was *mandated* in 2013 to "deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas". More recently MINUSMA has supported the redeployment of the Malian Defence and Security Forces to the North of Mali demonstrating that the UN have identified the Malian government as the legitimate authority. The mission has also supported the host state in its fight against terrorism by assisting with Mali's specialized unit on terrorism and transnational organized crime and with the drafting of a national counter-terrorism strategy. MINUSMA provides support to both French forces, *Operation Barkhane*, and a regional counter-terrorism force, the G-5 Sahel Force. These non-UN forces use offensive force to defeat insurgency. Importantly for a discussion on stabilization, the UN Security Council *stated* the G-5 Sahel Force will "facilitate the fulfilment by MINUSMA of its mandate to *stabilize* Mali".

MINUSCA was mandated in 2014 in response to the Central African Republic's (CAR) descent into conflict in 2013 and deployed amidst ongoing warfighting. MINUSCA was originally *mandated* to pursue "efforts in favour of the extension of State authority", the promotion of the rule of law, and the protection of civilians, amongst other activities. In *Operation Bekpa* in February 2017 the

mission sought to stabilise the town of Bambari by securing the agreement that the armed groups would leave. To achieve this MINUSCA used armed helicopters to engage armed groups attempting to re-enter the town. Once the armed groups were pushed out of the area the mission was able to access the population, re-establish the position of the CAR authorities, and begin peacebuilding efforts.

Both missions have sought to extend state authority into geographic areas which had fallen under the control of armed groups. Once the areas have been secured the UN has assisted with the rebuilding of state infrastructure such as providing a secure environment for civilian authorities to return, the rebuilding of courts, assistance with the reopening of prisons and much more.

Peacebuilding initiatives take place once state authority has been established such as, the empowerment of women to participate in elections and the national reconciliation process, training to prevent sexual violence, and the establishment of local peace and reconciliation committees to resolve disputes peacefully at the local level.

The next steps

The UN has thus far avoided giving clarification on what exactly the organisation means when it makes use of the term 'stabilization'. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw a picture of what stabilization entails despite the Security Council not being sufficiently clear when enumerating mission mandates and activities.

A prevailing view within academic literature of what stabilization means is that the inclusion of the term in the missions involves a preconception that force will be needed to solve the conflict. Similarly, I have suggested that the UN adopts

a two-step approach to stabilization: (1) force is used to deter or displace armed groups and (2) civilian led peacebuilding activities, aimed at entrenching the rule of law and re-establishing the state as the legitimate authority, take place in the power vacuum left behind.

That being said the two-step approach is not without risks. An increase in the amount of force being used by UN troops could result in intensification of the conflict. Such intensification could have legal ramifications for both individual peacekeepers and the UN as an organisation. In most situations peacekeepers cannot be targeted for attack because they are protected as civilians but increased warfighting could result in peacekeepers becoming legitimate targets. The UN mission as a whole could also become a party to the conflict under international humanitarian law, also known as the laws of war or law of armed conflict. Becoming a party to the conflict is important as the UN mission could be targeted for attack but also accused of taking sides and no longer remaining impartial, a core tenet of UN peacekeeping.

The UN has worked closely with the host state on increasing the capacity of the state's security forces and, in the case of MINUSMA, has provided support for counter-terrorism. There is a risk that communities could be alienated where the UN supports a host state which has previously committed human rights violations and war crimes or is regarded as synonymous with non-UN counter-terrorism forces. The UN needs to actively pursue meaningful partnerships with local communities to ensure peacebuilding work is effective in achieving lasting peace.

Future research agendas will need to conduct deeper analyses into these and similar issues to assess the consequences of the UN using increased force,

involvement in counter-terrorism, and the designation of the host state as the legitimate authority.

Image credit:UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe.

About the Author

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